

'The Emperor's New Clothes - Revisited'

a rallying point for training directors

Philip J. King

The training department in an organization has the potential and capability of being one of the most effective areas of the operation. If we as training professionals do not seize the opportunity to impact the top level of the organization, there are plenty of contenders for that role, including OD specialists, personnel people, systems analysts, etc!

Several years ago an absorbing article, "The Emperor's New Clothes" appeared in the *Training and Development Journal* (July 1970). It got me thinking very intensely as to where the training profession had been and where it should be, whether there was in fact a training technology, etc.

I believe the trainers have come a long way in legitimizing their role and competing for support

from top management. This article identifies a few of the reasons why some training activities flourish while others diminish in importance. The training and development activity is much too vital for the latter to happen!

Historically, the training function emerged from the need of companies to train large numbers of people in some systematic way in support of the war effort during World Wars I and II. Job instruction training (commonly referred to as J.I.T.) brought formalized training into the forefront and created a position for the training "professionals."

Training Function's Role

When business was good, training activities flourished and maintained adequate staffs. But when

profits declined or a "squeeze" was applied, the training activity was low on the priority list of important functions. How could an activity be so vital at one point in time and expendable at another? I submit that this might have something to do with the role of the training function and its failure to successfully compete for the support of top management.

There are a number of reasons for this, but, in this article, I would like to develop the following:

1. The failure of the training activity to operate as an economic unit.
2. Submitting to the philosophy that any training is good.
3. Lack of a systematic framework for the training function.
4. Lack of a results-centered orientation.

There is no denying that training is a significant expense to an organization. Industry earmarks billions of dollars annually for the training of employees. New people, new methods, new equipment and new jobs make it mandatory for training. A good portion of the training conducted is justifiable, whereas a large portion represents wasted money.

Only recently have organizations started to look at the cost of human resources versus material resources. Of course, one of the largest expenses is for labor. In a labor-intensive business, such as some service industries, labor costs represent up to 70 per cent of earnings. The accounting department watches every nickel that is spent for equipment and supplies but no one is charged with calculating the worth of the human resources.

Investing In Productivity

Is there any reason why training of an employee could not be viewed as an investment and his or her productivity as a return on that investment? To date, most training departments have not been very business-minded and this has affected their credibility in the organization.

Let's look at some of the business indicators that are relevant. How many training departments have calculated the economic costs of training? This includes *trainee time*, because the figure represents two-thirds or more of the total cost. And what about the opportunity costs involved? This includes such considerations as what could the man have been doing if he was not in training and was this perhaps worth more to the organization?

This relates to the second point I wish to emphasize: *Training should not be regarded as a panacea for the organization's performance problems!* I believe it is safe to say that most managers, when confronted with a perform-

ance problem, look to training as the solution. It is interesting to note that something like 80 per cent of performance problems cannot be solved by training. Often all that has to be done to improve performance is to change the consequences. If lack of knowledge on the employee's part is truly the problem, then some training might be the answer. However, if lack of feedback, task interference, improper methods, etc. are the real cause of the problem, then training is an expensive alternative. A number of firms have demonstrated significant savings as a result of redesigning consequences.

"Training By Crisis"

What this demonstrates is that training has been largely reaction rather than action-oriented. Perhaps we have been "training by crisis" at the same time we have been warning our managers of the ineffectiveness of "management by crisis." If that is the case, there is little wonder that training has been regarded as an expendable activity. Maybe trainers would be regarded with higher esteem by managers if they did not always suggest training as a solution. A third reason for the training department's plight is *lack of a systematic framework for the training function*. Most trainers follow some pattern for their activity along the lines of:

1. Determine training needs.
2. Design an approach to meet these needs.
3. Develop the approach.
4. Implement the training.
5. Evaluate the training.

Sadly enough, in many cases this is as far as we come to a systems orientation. We blindly follow the steps, give the training and perhaps even rigorously evaluate it. And we pat ourselves on the back for another good program.

A number of questions need to be asked before we can be comfortable with designating this a system. First of all, does the train-

ing exist to support an identifiable organizational goal or objective? Was the performance problem or deficiency identified before any training was designed? Was the "real world" to which the trainee will return taken into account in formulating the course content? Was training considered in relation to other departments, the organization, society, governmental activity, etc.? The organization can be viewed as a subsystem with the training department as a subsystem within it.

In organizational development jargon, training is (or should be) a developmental response to change as opposed to a nondevelopmental response. It can easily be the latter if other subsystems and systems such as mentioned above are not considered.

One Good Example

I think one good example of an external influence which has great implications for training departments is the increasing importance of *metrication*. A great number of our industries are multinational in scope and do business with foreign companies who utilize the metric system. Current estimates are that in less than 10 years the United States will be using the metric system. It is not too soon for us trainers to begin systematically planning to meet this need. If not, in a few more years we may find ourselves reacting to yet another crisis.

Lastly, but by no means definitively, training departments must adopt a results-centered orientation. Basically this means that we train for *results* rather than train just for the sake of training. For years, trainers have been admonished to evaluate their programs, particularly management training. Periodically articles will be published reiterating this stance. Even so, so-called "hard" indicators (generally economic) are infrequently used (or at least reported).

It is altogether possible that the reason for this might be because the training was not undertaken in response to some *specific* performance problem. It seems to me that management training affords an interesting example. How many management training "programs" are installed and continue to operate because top management is convinced that every manager "needs" it? What would be so far-fetched about giving managers a behavioral (assessment exercises, etc.) as well as paper and pencil type pretest and if they do well, excuse them from the training? Would this upset the corporate apple cart? Perhaps, but wouldn't it be wiser (and more effective) to concentrate on those managers who lack specific measurable skills?

That framework would make a results-centered orientation much easier, because trainers would know what they were measuring. Put another way, they would have training objectives that were realistic, specific and measurable. Let us examine that component "realistic" more closely.

By realistic and relevant I mean that it relates to the "real world" of the trainee. The times we get the trainee response of "great program, but I wish my boss had it," are too numerous to count. I believe that what this response really means is, "I could not put a lot of this to use back in my department." Sound familiar to you?

Transfer of Training

One way of responding to this might be, if they cannot use it why bother to teach it. Another, more constructive, approach could be "how can we change the consequences or organizational climate so the trainee can use what he or she learned?" Yet another possibility would be to redesign the training so it can be applied in the "real world." The principle of *transfer of training* is at issue here.

If your training is results-or-

iented it will address itself to these critical issues. The best part is that you will be able to point with pride to accomplishments that you can document and relate to the growth of your organization.

Just a word about training "fads" or the "bandwagon" approach to training. Very few departments are immune to the organizational pressures that accompany some new training panacea or cure-all. Certainly some of the sounder approaches should be investigated to determine their relevance and merit. However, I would argue for a research oriented approach so they can be objectively evaluated. Transactional analysis is not the answer to all our problems any more than theory "y" and job enrichment.

In summary, I would like to reiterate the position that training departments can effectively compete for the role of change agent for their organization and enjoy top management support. In order to accomplish this they must operate economically, train only when this is the most viable alternative, train within a systematic framework, and train for results!

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